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The Winter War: Its Causes and Effects

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Abstract

The Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940, also known as the Winter War, forms a curious portion of World War II history that bears further study. Occurring during the “Phony War”—the period of calm following Hitler’s invasion of Poland—the Winter War offers a glimpse into the attitudes of the major powers as the growing necessity of the coming war becomes increasingly clear during 1939 and 1940. Specifically, the Winter War provides insight into Soviet imperialism and its concerns over German aggression, and forms a crucial portion of the German decision to invade Russia in the summer of 1941. Without consideration of the Winter War and the conclusions drawn from it by the major world powers, it is difficult to form a satisfactory explanation of each power’s behavior in the Second World War. Therefore, though it was a relatively brief conflict, the Winter War is crucial to a proper understanding of the events of World War II as a whole.

Keywords

Winter War, Russo-Finnish War, World War II, Russian Revolution, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Treaty of Dorpat, Nazi-Soviet Pact, Operation Barbarossa

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The Winter War: Its Causes and Effects

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Introduction

The Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940, also known as the Winter War, forms a curious portion of World War II history that bears further study. Occurring during the “Phony War”—the period of calm following Hitler’s invasion of Poland—the Winter War offers a glimpse into the attitudes of the major powers as the growing necessity of the coming war becomes increasingly clear during 1939 and 1940. Specifically, the Winter War provides insight into Soviet imperialism and its concerns over German aggression and forms a crucial portion of the German decision to invade Russia in the summer of 1941. Without consideration of the Winter War and the conclusions drawn from it by the major world powers, it is difficult to form a satisfactory explanation of each power’s behavior in the Second World War. Therefore, though it was a relatively brief conflict, the Winter War is crucial to a proper understanding of the events of World War II as a whole.

The first pieces of the puzzle that must be reconstructed and analyzed are found in the details leading into the origin of the Russo-Finnish War. This origin is composed of three elements of prime significance: the history of Finland’s relationship with Russia, Russia’s perception of its vulnerabilities in 1939-1940 to a German invasion, and Russia’s desire to project strength as a means of deterrence.

The origin of the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-1940 begins with the Russian Revolution of 1917. The upheaval of the First World War and the resulting revolution ousted the Tsar’s government, ushering in massive changes in the Russian political system. These changes offered favorable opportunities for some portions of the former Tsar’s empire, such as Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Finland to seek independence from the new communist government.¹

Finland, though it had been a part of Russia since it was conquered by Alexander I of Russia in the Finnish War of 1809,² had maintained a high level of national autonomy as a semi-self-ruling Grand Duchy in the Tsar’s Russia. In addition, Finland’s nationalism had been awakened to the dangers inherent in being the subjects of Russian power after Tsar Nicholas II’s attempts at the “Russification” of Finnish politics in 1899.³ After the Bolshevik

¹ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 378.

² John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 47.

³ Jyrkil Loima, “A Case Study of Education and Nationalism: the Multicultural Fight for ‘Souls and Minds’ in Finland, 1891-1921,” *The Historian*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (2014): 752.

toppling of the Tsar's regime, Finland was ready to break with Russia and seized this period of Russian disorganization as an opportunity for complete independence from any superior power.⁴

One of Russia's new leaders, Vladimir Lenin, was confident that the communist revolution begun in Russia would spread to the world. For this reason, he was willing to allow people groups like the Finns to secede from Russia, sure that they would return when the proletariat gained strength and overthrew their capitalist overlords as Russia itself had done.⁵ However, the inevitable revolution was not the only reason Russia behaved this way. In 1917 the fledgling Bolshevik government in Leningrad—formerly St. Petersburg—had other pressing concerns.⁶ The Soviets were struggling to assert and maintain control at home as the makings of a civil war developed.⁷ Furthermore, the people groups seeking independence, Finland included, had maintained close associations with Germany.⁸ As Germany quickly demonstrated its willingness to materially and militarily support pro-German movements in these regions,⁹ war-torn Russia was forced to allow the balkanization of its old holdings for fear of further conflict with Germany.¹⁰ As such, the fragile new regime recognized that it did not have the practical might or political capital to resist Finnish independence, and contented itself with covertly supporting the quickly defeated communist party in Finland's brief civil war.¹¹

After achieving its independence from Russia and—with German aid—quelling its civil war with the defeat of the pro-communist forces,¹² Finland solidified its global position with the Treaty of Dorpat in 1920. Negotiated between Finland and Russia, the treaty set the territorial boundary lines and detailed the mutual rights and obligations of each toward the other.¹³ While the treaty was an important diplomatic step for the new nations, neither Russia nor Finland was particularly pleased with the details. The Finnish nationalists felt that Finland's delegation had conceded more to their former overlords than it should have,¹⁴ while Russian weakness forced them to grant Finland control of a large strip of the Karelian Isthmus near the recently-renamed Russian city of Leningrad.¹⁵ Future Russian leaders, most notably Joseph Stalin, would find this demarcation uncomfortably close to Leningrad's vital population centers.¹⁶

⁴ Keegan, *The First World War*, 378.

⁵ Ibid, 378.

⁶ Loima, "A Case Study of Education and Nationalism," 762.

⁷ Keegan, *The First World War*, 380.

⁸ Ibid, 378.

⁹ Ibid, 378.

¹⁰ Ibid, 379.

¹¹ Ibid, 378.

¹² Ibid, 380.

¹³ Albin T. Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War: A Study of Russo-Finnish Diplomacy," *World Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1954): 169.

¹⁴ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 169.

¹⁵ Keegan, *The Second World War*, 47.

¹⁶ Ibid, 47.

There are several important conclusions to draw about Finnish and Russian attitudes and perspectives from Finland's history with Russia that impacted the development of the Winter War. Given its hundred-year control of Finland, Russia saw Finland as a part of its historic territory and hegemony, which was necessary to restore its place as an empire. Finland, given Russia's conquest of its territory in 1809, the period of Russification by the Tsars, and Communist Russia's interference in its civil war, saw the new Russian government in much the same light as it saw the old, as a potential aggressor to its sovereignty.¹⁷ While these attitudes and perspectives lingered under the surface and informed the strategic choices made by both sides, the impetus for the conflict stemmed from the Treaty of Dorpat.

Although both sides were initially unhappy with the borders settled upon in 1920, those attitudes had changed by 1939. The Finns, though initially displeased, had grown accustomed to the treaty and were content to retain it.¹⁸ Russia, on the other hand, had originally viewed the treaty as a stain upon its national honor, but was content to wait on a natural remedy through time and the inevitable process of revolution. However, changing world circumstances had changed its views and Russia now considered an alteration to the Treaty of Dorpat's terms as of vital importance to its security. By the late 1930s, German actions had shortened Russian patience for the inevitable communist revolution that was supposed to return its control of Finnish territory. Specifically, the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact and the subsequent German invasion of Poland caused considerable angst in Russia.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact, which split Eastern Europe between Germany and Russia,¹⁹ gave Russia control over the Baltic nations—including Finland.²⁰ The restoration of these nations would substantially allow Communist Russia to mirror the borders of its old empire under the Tsars.²¹ While this agreement formed an incredible opportunity for the new communist government to assert itself as a rising world power, it also contained a potential danger should Russia fail to capitalize on it. Germany quickly took advantage of its portion of territory allotted by the agreement when it aggressively seized western Poland in 1939. If Russia failed to exert control over the areas given to it in the Pact, there was a danger that its co-signer would see Russia as weak and ripe for German invasion. The effect of the agreement, according to one scholar, was that Russia attempted to mimic Germany by "imposing [its] will on smaller powers."²² Attempting to follow Germany's pattern of behavior, Russia demanded and received mutual assistance and military access

¹⁷ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 169.

¹⁸ Ibid, 173.

¹⁹ Robert M. Citino, "White Death," *World War II*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2014): 44.

²⁰ Kimmo Rentola, "The Finnish Communists and the Winter War," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (1998): 592.

²¹ Citino, "White Death," 45.

²² D. W. Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland, 30 November 1939," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (1986): 221.

treaties with Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia,²³ leaving Finland as the only Baltic holdout to Russian hegemony.²⁴

The Nazi-Soviet Pact, then, predisposed Russia to be unwilling to accept the status quo of its interwar period relationship with Finland.²⁵ However, Russia was also concerned that any perception of weakness would lead to a major problem for its national security. Specifically, Russia was intensely worried that Germany, its ideological opponent, would invade Russia through Finland.²⁶ While any potential invasion was a matter of consternation, the close proximity of the Finnish border to the key Russian city of Leningrad essentially guaranteed the city's capture by the German blitzkrieg.²⁷ Thus, Russia, due to its feelings of vulnerability and need to project strength to hide weakness, determined to win concessions from Finland,²⁸ ideally through diplomatic might, but military force remained an option.

The need to break the status quo with Finland heightened after the Austro-German Anschluss in March of 1938. From an ideological perspective, Bolshevik Russia viewed war and expansion as the essence of Nazism.²⁹ Germany's aggressive expansionism after Hitler's rise to power only confirmed Russian concerns. Faced with Nazi Germany's growing threat to the future of the Soviet Revolution in Western Europe, the Soviets were looking for ways to protect themselves and further their interests. Shortly thereafter, Russia opened negotiations with Finnish diplomats to strengthen its position against the potential of German aggression.³⁰ In exchange for a generous gift of territory in Soviet Karelia,³¹ the Russians demanded the Finnish border on the Karelian Isthmus be moved 70 km to the west—a mutual assistance pact against German aggression—and access to a naval base off the western coast of Finland.³² All of these demands were calculated as defensive measures against a German invasion. The territory on the Karelian Isthmus and the space opened by moving the border would allow the Russians to create a land buffer to protect Leningrad, while the naval base would, in theory, allow the Russians to prevent a German force from landing in Finland in the first place.³³

²³ Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland," 208.

²⁴ Peter J. Beck, "The Winter War in the International Context: Britain and the League of Nation's Role in the Russo-Finnish Dispute, 1939-1940," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1981): 59.

²⁵ Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland," 221.

²⁶ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 170-172.

²⁷ Ibid, 172.

²⁸ Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland," 222.

²⁹ Toomas Varrak, "The Secret Dossier of Finnish Marshal C.G.E. Mannerheim: On the Diplomatic Prelude of World War II," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2016): 83.

³⁰ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 169.

³¹ P.W. Doerr, "Frigid but Unprovocative: British Policy towards the USSR from the Nazi-Soviet Pact to the Winter War, 1939," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2001): 433.

³² Kalervo Hovi, "Finland's Rapprochement to National-Socialist Germany as Reaction Against Winter War," *Romanian Journal for Baltic & Nordic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013): 58.

³³ Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland," 222.

It is worth noting that some scholars assert that Russia, given its relationship with Germany, was not legitimately concerned about a German invasion.³⁴ Instead, it was primarily motivated by a desire to restore the bounds of the old empire through subjugating weaker peoples, like the Finns.³⁵ While it is clear that Russia was looking out for its own imperial interests,³⁶ which doubtlessly included expansion as its behavior after the end of World War II amply demonstrates, it still had good reason to be concerned about its defensive position given Germany's recent actions. While not as significant as the German invasion of Poland or its actions toward Austria or Czechoslovakia, one factor that worried Russian leaders and threatened to compromise its defensive position was the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.³⁷ The agreement allowed Germany to radically increase the size of its fleet, threatening Russian control of the Baltic Sea and its vital sea route to the Atlantic. Germany's decision to strengthen its surface fleet, as authorized by the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, likely played a significant role in Russia's decision to include access to a naval base in the Baltic Sea as one of its primary demands to Finland. Thus, while Russia was undoubtedly seeking to increase its area of control, it had legitimate causes of concern about German aggression through Finland or the Gulf of Finland and felt the need to appear stronger and better defended by altering its borders with Finland.³⁸ Regardless of Russia's motives, size, and relative might, Finland was not interested in conceding its territory to Russia or anyone else. The years since 1917 and the deepening world crisis in 1939 had not led Finland to forget its long history under Russian domination. Its experiences, including Russian interference in Finnish politics in the interwar period, contributed to a "legacy of suspicion" toward Russian diplomatic offers, especially those in which Russia would gain control of historically Finnish territory.³⁹ As Russian domination of Estonia following its mutual assistance pact had proved,⁴⁰ surrendering Finnish territory or military freedom of action to their "former imperial masters" would severely threaten Finland's sovereignty and independence.⁴¹ Not only was Finland suspicious of Russia's motives, it was also hesitant to enter into binding relations with any major-power bloc during this period of its history.⁴² Its hesitancy was only increased by the Russians' suggestion that Finland ought to ally itself militarily with Russia against the prospect of German aggression. Just as Finland saw Communist Russia in terms of the Tsars' suppression of Finnish sovereignty, it still thought of Germany as the supporter of its independence movement in 1917.⁴³ Though National-Socialist Germany was very different from the Kaiser's Germany, Finland still had significant economic, scholastic, cultural, and ecclesiastical ties with Germany and the

³⁴ Varrak, "The Secret Dossier of Finnish Marshal C.G.E. Mannerheim," 84.

³⁵ Ibid, 85.

³⁶ Roger Reese, "Lessons of the Winter War: A Study in the Military Effectiveness of the Red Army, 1939-1940," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2008): 827.

³⁷ Ibid, 86.

³⁸ Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland," 222.

³⁹ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 169.

⁴⁰ Evald Laasi, "Finland's Winter War and Estonian Neutrality," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1993): 269-270.

⁴¹ Citino, "White Death," 45.

⁴² Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 170.

⁴³ Hovi, "Finland's Approchement to National-Socialist Germany," 58.

German-speaking peoples.⁴⁴ Thus, despite its growing disillusionment with Nazi Germany's expansionistic behavior, Finland was inclined to see Germany as its defender against Russia rather than the other way around.⁴⁵

Although Finland received no substantive promises of support from any of its neighbors or the western powers, it refused Russian demands time and time again throughout the off-and-on negotiations of 1939. Though the Finns ordered a partial military mobilization in response to Russian activity in Latvia and Estonia during October, it was optimistic that German interest in Finland would deter Russia from advancing its demands through force.⁴⁶ This confidence in German support prompted Finland to assert a stronger negotiating stance with Russia than its military position—or the secret details of the Nazi-Soviet Pact—would suggest was prudent.

After months of unproductive diplomatic activity, Russian patience expired on November 9th, as the negotiations ground to a halt.⁴⁷ Though Russia could have simply reinitiated negotiations at another time, failing to gain even modest concessions from its small neighbor made Russia appear weak on the world stage and lent credibility to reports of its military inability.⁴⁸ Unwilling to wait or suffer the uncertainty of the status quo, Russian forces staged a military incident on November 26th near the Finnish border and quickly demanded that the Finns remove their troops from the region.⁴⁹ Finland again failed to comply with its demands and Russia invaded on November 30th, 1939.⁵⁰

The Russian battle plan required the roughly twenty divisions contained in the Leningrad Military District—composed mainly of reservists—to overwhelm and destroy the Finnish defenses in only twelve days.⁵¹ Given its timetable, the Soviets were clearly expecting their invasion of Finland to mirror Germany's quick invasion and subjugation of Poland.⁵² However, almost nothing would go according to plan for the Russian military in 1939. Russian leaders, guilty of consistently underestimating the strength of Finnish troops and defenses,⁵³ divided their forces into two groups. The first army group attacked straight up the Karelian Isthmus from Leningrad, while the second army group entered Finland through its long eastern flank.⁵⁴ Russian forces, though significantly superior in strength and material, were steadily defeated by the hardy Finnish resistance.⁵⁵ Russia's divided forces were not strong enough to break through the Mannerheim Line along the Karelian

⁴⁴ Ibid, 58.

⁴⁵ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 171.

⁴⁶ Doerr, "Frigid but Unprovocative," 431.

⁴⁷ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 184.

⁴⁸ Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War against Finland," 217.

⁴⁹ Anderson, "Origins of the Winter War," 186.

⁵⁰ Keegan, *The Second World War*, 47.

⁵¹ Reese, "Lessons of the Winter War," 827.

⁵² Citino, "White Death," 45.

⁵³ Roger Reese, "Surrender and Capture in the Winter War and Great Patriotic War: Which was the Anomaly?" *Global War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2011): 91.

⁵⁴ Keegan, *The Second World War*, 47.

⁵⁵ Reese, "Lessons of the Winter War," 828.

Isthmus nor mobile enough to compete with the agile ski troops on Finland's eastern border. Consequently, Russian troops—after a quick initial advance—began suffering heavy losses and either ground to a halt against the camouflaged bunkers and anti-tank defenses of the Mannerheim Line, or were surrounded and ambushed by invisible foes in the snowbound forests.⁵⁶ The Russian military, however, was able to learn from its mistakes in 1939 and, by the spring of 1940, launched a new offensive that took advantage of its numerical strength, uniting its forces and compelling Finland to fight a war of attrition that its small population could not withstand.⁵⁷ 105 days after the war began—on March 13—Finland's high casualties forced it to sign a peace treaty giving in to Russian demands.⁵⁸

Though in theory the war ended in a Russian victory, it is arguable that the costs of war had hollowed the spoils of success. In this vein, Nikita Khrushchev would later say that “all of us sensed in our victory a defeat by the Finns.”⁵⁹ On the positive side, Russia had acquired more territory than it had originally sought in negotiations, including the naval bases in the Gulf of Finland and the land on the Karelian Isthmus, which it considered so important to Russian national defense.⁶⁰ However, it had come at a terrible cost in life. All told, the Russian military had over 500,000 men killed or injured in the conflict, while the Finnish army lost only 60,000 men.⁶¹ In addition to its appalling loss of life, the Russian military lost any prestige it had maintained through the interwar period.⁶² Hitler and his generals looked at the Winter War and saw confirmation of their view that communism, whatever its numerical advantage, had a “hollow center.”⁶³ Less ideologically, they found evidence that Stalin's massacre of Russian military commanders in 1937 and 1938 had produced an incompetent, poorly-led army that would be quickly defeated by the well-trained and ably-commanded German armies.⁶⁴ By acquiring territory crucial to Russia's defense should Germany invade, Russia achieved its tactical objectives. However, this supposed accomplishment actually weakened its defense and increased its risk of a German invasion. Before the German Invasion of Russia in 1941, Adolf Hitler told his generals that they had only “to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure [would] come crashing down.”⁶⁵ Implicit in this phrase is Hitler's analysis of Russia's military strength as demonstrated by the Winter War. Though he clearly learned from Russia's poor showing in the first half of the Winter War, it seems he took no lessons from the second half. Arguably, if Hitler had viewed the Winter War as an integrated whole, he would have reached a radically different conclusion about Russian military effectiveness and resilience. The Winter War certainly

⁵⁶ Ibid, 828.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 830.

⁵⁸ Timo Toivonen, “War and Equality: The Social Background of the Victims of the Finnish Winter War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1998): 473.

⁵⁹ Citino, “White Death,” 50.

⁶⁰ Spring, “The Soviet Decision for War against Finland,” 208.

⁶¹ Reese, “Lessons of the Winter War,” 830.

⁶² Martin Kahn, “‘Russia Will Assuredly Be Defeated’: Anglo-American Government Assessments of Soviet War Potential before Operation Barbarossa,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2012), 227.

⁶³ Keegan, *The Second World War*, 174.

⁶⁴ Citino, “White Death,” 50.

⁶⁵ Reese, “Lessons of the Winter War,” 852.

displayed many significant weaknesses in the Russian Army. Most notable of which were its shortage of experienced commanders, its poorly-trained troops,⁶⁶ and the inefficient organization of the Commissar system.⁶⁷ However, the War also showed Russia's military strength, albeit in an unconventional fashion. Though the Russian attack began disastrously, the army was able to regroup, overcome poor leadership, suffer enormous losses, and achieve victory over a superior foe by relentless attacks and weight of numbers.⁶⁸ In spite of all its failures, the Russian army overcame the enemy. The Germans, then, should have realized that the Russian army would not be broken by a quick campaign during the summer of 1941. Russian commanders would come and go, but, with its nearly limitless reserves, the Russian army would continue to fight until it eventually wore down its opponent. Viewed in this light, the Winter War boded ill for Hitler's decision to kick in the Russian door with Operation Barbarossa.

Russia's decision to invade Finland in 1939 was motivated by a desire to project strength and secure its border from invasion through Finland. It could be argued that it failed in both of these respects. First, in its efforts to secure its border against an invasion from Finland, it secured the animus of the Finnish people, guaranteeing that when a German invasion came, it would be accompanied by the aggrieved armies of Finland fighting to regain their territory.⁶⁹ Second, though it eventually made Finland acquiesce to its demands, Russia was not able to project strength in doing so. In fact, contrary to its intention, the Winter War convinced the world that Russia would fall easily to a first-rate army.⁷⁰ Thus, the War projected not Russian strength, but its weakness. However, its apparent weakness was what fooled Hitler into gambling his armies in a lightning attack on Moscow. Among Russia's gains in the Winter War was the contempt of German military leadership—allowing Russia to establish an empire far beyond that of the Tsars in Eastern Europe—as it rolled back German advances along the path to Berlin in 1944.

Conclusion

Viewed in this light, it is clear that the Winter War—though it occurred during the curiously quiet period between Hitler's invasion of Poland and the true beginnings of hostilities with the invasion of France—lays crucial groundwork for understanding the larger conflict and the ultimate course of World War II. Without consideration of the Winter War and its impact on Hitler's perception of Russia's military strength, it is difficult to understand Hitler's decision to provoke and attack the largest military in the world. Without understanding why Stalin invaded Finland out of an intense fear of a German invasion, Stalin's later appeasement policy toward a Germany clearly arming to invade makes little sense.⁷¹ In addition, the Winter War explains and provides a prototype of how the Russian military could suffer such massive defeats in the summer of 1941, rearm and

⁶⁶ Reese, "Surrender and Capture in the Winter War," 98.

⁶⁷ Kahn, "Russia Will Assuredly Be Defeated," 227.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 852.

⁶⁹ Toivonen, "War and Equality," 473-474.

⁷⁰ Kahn, "Russia Will Assuredly Be Defeated," 227.

⁷¹ Keegan, *The Second World War*, 180-181.

regroup, and counterattack, turning the tide against superior German forces. Though it lasted only 105 days, engaged only one major world power, and could be considered a military fiasco, the Winter War played a crucial role in the development of World War II, especially in the ways in which it impacted the decisions of Germany and Russia in 1940 and 1941 and foreshadowed the eventual outcome of a German invasion.

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